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**Why Service-Learning Matters**

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**Rationale**

One important quality that an effective leader must possess is the ability to build partnerships between the school, family and community. Research indicates that a child’s success in school is directly related to the amount of support coming from home. If parents value education, it is likely the student will as well. (Wisconsin DPI, 2009). By establishing a positive relationship with families and community members, a school is able to respond to a variety of community interests and needs, and organize community resources. A great leader is able to establish two-way communication and creatively develop methods to attract volunteers, while providing learning opportunities at home and in the community.

I have been able to learn the importance of this through the development and implementation of Give Back Day in our community. Over the past five years, the second Wednesday in May has been a special day for the students at Chetek-Weyerhaeuser High School. Give Back Day began as a way to ensure that students had an opportunity to take part in a service-learning project each year while in high school. The day is focused on students and staff “giving back” through the completion of projects designed to serve area communities. It’s a powerful day and leaves a lasting positive impression on everyone involved. Students benefit because they feel their participation is meaningful and find out that serving others feels good. The community is able to see young people contributing to bettering the places we live, work, and play. It is a win-win day for everyone involved!

**Competencies Met**

The idea of conducting a service-learning day came from a leadership conference where a neighboring school district presented information regarding a service-learning day they organize and have tremendous success in doing each year. I immediately knew that I wanted Chetek-Weyerhaeuser High School to implement a day just like the one I had learned about. The opportunity to serve our school and community is something I am passionate about and feel strongly that all youth should experience. As described below, research also supports service-learning and has a positive correlation to student learning and success after high school. Our high school principal and I met to discuss the potential and agreed it was something worth investigating. I took on the lead role in organizing the day and seeking input from staff as to what the day should look like. **(*Leadership:* 1 servant, moral, collab; 2 organization vision; 4 public sch hist, philosophy; 7 safe, effective environment.  *Decision Making:* 6 problem solving strategies.)**

Once the decision was made to move forward in planning a service-learning day for staff and students, it was communicated to all staff and a day in early May was set aside for the event. A Give Back Day wiki was created as a common place to sign up for projects determined by homerooms that meet twice a week. Students in homerooms took on an active role in determining the projects, organizing supplies, contacting community members/businesses, and designing t-shirts. Some of the projects include building and putting up bird and bat houses, washing windows of area businesses, painting murals, cleaning up parks and rivers, building sand volleyball and disc golf courses, and helping area residents with projects they are unable to complete on their own. **(*Leadership:* 9 effective communication. *Human Resources:* 9 community support. *Administration of Curriculum:* 1 supervision. *Finance:* 5 data and decision making; 9 budget options.)**

Other administrative details included designing and ordering t-shirts for all students, staff, and volunteers, determining an agenda for the day, setting a busing schedule to and from project sites, lunch menu and organization, and a slideshow of pictures taken throughout the day. The slideshow allowed students, staff, and volunteers are able to see all the variety of projects completed and the power of an entire school working to better our community and environment. It also motivates students’ to stick around and see the final results of all the hard work completed that day. Below you will find the agenda for the day:

**Chetek-Weyerhaeuser High School**

**5th Annual**

**Give Back Day!**

**Community Wide Service Learning Project**

**May 8, 2013, 2013**

8:00 - 8:03 Welcome - Larry Zeman

8:03 - 8:10 Denise Michaelsen - Review of Agenda for the Day

8:10 - 8:15 Report to Homerooms (Attendance, T-Shirts, Gather Supplies)

8:15 - 8:30 Load Bus and Travel or Walk to Site

8:30 - 11:45 Work on Project

11:45 - 12:30 Lunch

12:30 - 12:55 Closing Ceremony (slide show and wrap-up)

**(*School Community:* 1 school as internal organ; 3 culture, ethnicity attitudes; 5 interpersonal relationships; 6 public relations; 9 service learning. *Learner Centered Leadership:* 7 celebrating accomplishments. *Principalship:* 2 manager vs leader;3 role in community; 5 role in finances.)**

Now that we are in the fifth year of implementation, the entire student body anticipates the day early in the school year, even though it doesn’t occur until the last month of the school year. Students eagerly want to know what kinds of projects will be available, when the t-shirt design contest will occur, and want to know how they can help in organizing the day.

**Supporting Research**

A growing body of research conducted by Learn and Serve America Programs suggests that “effective service-learning programs improve grades, increase attendance in school, and develop students' personal and social responsibility.” A number of studies show a positive correlation between academics and service-learning. The impact of Service-Learning on Transitions to Adulthood survey examined the ways in which service-learning affected youths’ attitudes and attributes once an adult. According to the results, “compared to their peers, young adults who participated in K-12 service-learning were more likely to discuss politics or community issues and vote in an election year, more politically and socially connected to their communities, both as leaders and role models, and more active members of society.” (Martin, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Crossley, 2006). According to Billig (2002), high quality service learning programs affect students in several positive ways, “primarily in the area of personal-social development, academic achievement, citizenship, and career awareness.” For all the reasons described above, connecting school and community is vital to the success of a school and important to the academic success of the students.

According to the National Community Service Hotline, community service experiences provide an opportunity for students to realize they can accomplish tasks that connect to real-world problems, challenges, and needs. Dan Simonet from the Americorps explained as students take part in service-learning projects they are able to “develop in the area of purpose through learning and formulating a deeper understanding of the connection between the classroom and the real-world.” Relevance in understanding how the knowledge they gain extends beyond the walls of the classroom and emotional engagement through connection of personal values, beliefs, and feelings about their education also transcends through service-learning opportunities and experiences. A sense of belonging occurs when relationships are built with students they might not normally converse with, as well as adults both in the school and community (Simonet 2008).

In another study titled, *Community Service and Service-Learning in Public Schools* it was found 30% of K-12 public schools engage students in service-learning and 9 out of 10 principals in school that offer service-learning said that it has a positive impact on students’ civic engagement, personal and social development, and school-community partnerships.

**So What?**

After five successful years implementing Give Back Day, it continues to be a positive and impactful day. In fact, the day has become so successful a group of community members would like to transition it into “give back month”. This would mean that projects/activities would take place over the course of a month, rather than just one day in May. The area newspaper has been a part of this conversation and wants to feature the philosophy each week during the month. It feels good to have so much enthusiasm and energy driving a day which is all about “giving back” and doing something for humanity and for the benefit of others. It was what the day was meant to turn into; it’s all about taking care of each other and pushing ourselves to give more than we think we are capable of. The connections and relationships built during the planning, implementation, and reflection are more than anyone thought possible. And it’s something students will never forget – they will reflect upon the positive impact they made for a long, long time.

**Bibliography**

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